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C O U R T S H I P A N D M A R R I A G E

When I first went to Brazil, in 1935, there had still been very little change in the ancient customs of the people with regard to courtship and marriage. In the great centers, such as Rio, São Paulo, and Recife, women were already becoming emancipated to a certain degree, but even there the old customs were still very much in force; and in the interior they were unshaken. Many changes have taken place since that time, due to the war, and to increased contacts with other countries, especially the United States. But even up to 1949 the old customs were still very much in effect, especially in the interior towns.

Brazil's background is Iberian, of course, and the effect of the Moorish occupation has never been lost. And while women are not kept strictly shut up in secret chambers, the idea nevertheless prevails that women, and especially young girls, must be carefully guarded and protected. The basic assumption is that the girl is a weak willed creature, without any force to protect herself; and since that is the way that others think of her, the girl comes to think of herself in her turn in the same way. Hence the girls are strictly guarded. In the old days she was educated in a convent school, or with private teachers at home. In recent years there have sprung up a number of coeducational high schools and colleges, which are strongly condemned by the reactionary elements of the people; but that is a recent development; twenty years ago such schools were almost unknown.

I remember hearing some of the children sing a song, in a mournful minor key, about a girl named Teresinha de Jesus, who, it seemed, was considered to have the apathetic sort of perfection considered desirable. The song stated that the only men she had ever known were her father, her brother, and her betrothed. That expresses pretty well the old time, accepted point of view. The frank and open comradeship so common between boys and girls in the United States was not only unknown to them, it was even beyond their power to conceive. In the present generation some of the young people have caught the idea, and consider such a comradeship desirable, but they are still far from attaining it, because old attitudes are not overcome all in

a day. An American friend of mine was once trying to explain to a Brazilian young man the North American attitude. He told the young man that in the United States the young man calls at the girl's home to take her out to a party, or a show; and the father tells him, tacitly if not in words, "I am placing my daughter in your care, and I expect you to protect her". The Brazilian youth was amazed, and replied, "I should consider that in the light of an insult to my manhood!"

Under such circumstances boys and girls find little opportunity to be together. But love always finds a way. Where opportunity is limited, a little contact may serve for a great deal; and a smile or a glance may often tell as much as a long conversation.

On fair evenings, especially Sunday or holiday evenings, the young people go out for a "passeio", which is a walk, but a rather specialized kind of walk. The girls walk in groups of five or six, up and down the principal streets, or round and round the open square where the weekly market is held, while the boys, in similar groups, also walk the same beat, in the opposite direction, or else line up along the sidewalk to watch the girls go by. The old folks generally bring out chairs and sit on the sidewalk to see the passers-by, and incidentally to keep a watchful eye on the young folks. During the passeio a girl might get a chance for a word with her boy friend, but it is not likely; and few girls indeed would so far defy convention as to leave the group and meet one of the boys (who are willing enough, in all conscience) alone.

Girls in boarding school have an added handicap, as school mistresses, especially when they are nuns, tend to be more strict than parents. ~~At a girls' school~~ In Garanhuns there was a girls' school located on one of the principal streets, and at a certain corner the boys used to stand conversing, hoping for a sight of a face at the window. The girls, of course, could find an infinity of excuses for going to the window. The boys used to refer to that corner as esquina do pecado, sin corner.

When a boy is vaguely recognized by the family as a suitor for the girl, he may call at her house, but he does not come inside, much less have a twosome in the parlor with the lights turned low. Most of the houses are built wall to wall, with the front wall directly against the sidewalk; (that custom, too, is giving way in recent years) and the boy stands outside the open window, while the girl stands inside. The members

of the family are seated in the living room, or go about their occupations in the house, and there are people constantly passing by along the sidewalk. Under these conditions they may converse, but it is clear that there could be no great degree of intimacy; even so much as a good night kiss is not to be thought of.

Not until they are engaged (noivos) are a young man and a girl allowed to be alone together, and even then not for long periods, nor far out of sight of her family. Brazilian parents well know the fickleness of man's heart, and are taking no chances.

I once related to a Brazilian friend an incident that I had heard of, which had taken place in the United States, when a young man, seeing a girl pass by on the other side of the street, made a rude remark to his companions of his lust for that girl, not knowing that one of the companions was her brother. The brother said nothing, but went and got a pistol, and confronting the young man who had made the remark, administered a severe punishment to him. My Brazilian friend countered with a similar story, but with a different ending, which may illustrate the difference in attitude. In his story the brother took no offense at the remark, but answered good naturedly, "That's not hard to arrange. Go speak to the old man, he'll let you marry her, and then you can have her."

Not only is there not the comradeship that North Americans are accustomed to have, but when a boy is paying attention to a girl, she feels herself very ill treated if he shows any attention to any other girl; whereas the boy, on his part, hearing that his girl friend has been receiving attentions from another boy, considers himself betrayed, and never wants to hear her name again. The idea of a girl having a date with a different boy each night in the week is simply beyond their comprehension. They have a tradition that a horn will grow on the head of a man whose wife or sweetheart is unfaithful; and such a man (even without visible evidence of the horn) is called a corno, which is considered a very base name to be called. Corno (Latin, cornu) means horn, but is not the word in regular use, chifre being generally employed. Of course in the coeducational schools the boys and girls pass notes, if they can get by with it. In the course of the petty police duty that falls to every schoolmaster I once intercepted a note from a boy to his thirteen year old girl friend, upbraiding

her with her faithlessness, (what a pity she never received it!) and saying, "The only reason the horn hasn't sprouted is because I never loved you any of the time."

"Speaking to the old man", (pedir em casamento) is the crucial point. The Brazilian father usually has far more authority over his daughter than the average North American father even pretends to have; and the father may even accept the offer of a desirable young man whom the daughter scarcely knows. When the engagement is established the young people exchange rings, though I believe the young man buys both the rings, the ring used being the same that will later be used for the wedding ring. During the engagement the ring is worn on the right hand, and on the occasion of the wedding is transferred to the left hand. Instead of making announcement through the press, the custom is to have engagement cards printed for distribution to friends.

Until the founding of the republic in 1889 marriage was under the sole control of the Roman Catholic Church, which was the established church of Brazil under the empire. The liberal spirits who prepared the constitution of the republic succeeded in disestablishing the Roman Catholic Church, guaranteeing religious freedom under the constitution for all religious bodies, and making marriage a civil contract, under control of the state. The only person authorized to celebrate a marriage in Brazil is the judge. One may have, or not as he choose, a religious ceremony; but to be legally married the couple must be married by the judge. Many loyal church people do have both the civil and the religious ceremony, but the law contemplates only the civil ceremony. However, since judges are not too plentiful, it sometimes works a hardship on the lovers. I have heard of cases where the wedding feast was all prepared, the cake made, and everything ready, and then the wedding had to be postponed because some pressing legal obligation made it impossible for the judge to officiate at the time agreed upon. Of course in the case of a prominent family the judge makes every effort to accommodate the couple; but in the case of the poor, unfortunately, often scant attention is paid. It is not entirely the judge's fault. Everything is complicated in Brazil, so that North Americans resident there often say in exasperation that the Brazilians choose the hardest and most inconvenient way to do everything. To get married, or to enter school, or to go on a journey, one must have a whole sheaf of

documents, beginning with a birth certificate, a vaccination certificate, in the case of a man a certificate of clearance with the military authorities, and petitions of this and certificates of that, all signed over stamps (because the stamp tax is one of the principal taxes) and notarized, and sometimes the notarization has to be notarized again. For that reason many poor people dispense with any marriage ceremony whatever, and simply live together in common law marriage because they can not afford the expense of a legal marriage. We had a cook, who after several years of faithful service with us decided to marry one of the school janitors. Both were well on in their thirties, and it would seem a simple matter. But time after time the man came to me for time off from his work to go and see about his wedding; and each time, after cooling his heels for an hour or two in the outer office he would be told, "It can't be next week, come back on the twenty-first", or some such answer. I did not like to interfere in the matter, but I finally went to the judge, whom I knew well, and asked him if something could not be done about it. He said, "It's not my fault, I'll marry them any time they come to my office on Monday or Wednesday between two and four, or on Saturday between ten and noon". But the clerk, and the registrar, and the notary had to get all the documents ready, and they were in no hurry. Within two or three weeks after I began to take a personal interest in the matter we finally got them married.

But that does not tell the whole story of the complications of marriage in Brazil. There is no legal divorce in Brazil, due, doubtless, to Roman Catholic influence, and the Roman Catholic Church, whose doctrine is that marriage is a sacrament of the church, has consistently refused to recognize the civil marriage. A woman whose husband is unfaithful, or mistreats her, has no recourse but to take it and like it, unless the way be open to "go home to mother". A man can generally leave; it is the woman that suffers most. But this dual conception of marriage often gives a man (less often a woman) a way out. A man may be separated from his legal wife, but if he was never married to her by a priest there is nothing to keep him from selecting another woman and marrying her with the ecclesiastical marriage. It is not considered a crime, since the state takes no cognizance of the ecclesiastical marriage anyway. But since many

people do consider an ecclesiastical marriage a valid marriage it is not hard to find a girl willing to be led to the altar in a marriage that she knows will not be valid before the law. Of course the children of such a marriage are illegitimate, but that gives people little concern in a land where illegitimacy is already so common.

I knew of a case of an army officer who was separated from his wife, and became enamored of a girl of a "good" family. He made no secret of his situation, but made suit for the girl. Her parents offered to consent to an ecclesiastical marriage; but the officer was a Protestant, and refused to have anything to do with such a marriage, preferring open adultery, although he knew that he would be suspended from his church for it. The girl's parents thereupon consented to the matter, and brought the girl and delivered her to his house, and they lived together, and were well received by the community. He was suspended from his church, as he had foreseen. I was there when the sentence of suspension was read from the pulpit, and so was the officer -- on the front seat, with his "wife". He felt that the church was right, and he continued to attend services there, but still kept the woman.

But even that is not all. There was a law in effect a few years ago in the state of Alagoas, and possibly in other states as well, though it has since been declared unconstitutional, which permitted what were called commercial marriages, or contract marriages. These were strictly business contracts, just as one might engage a typist at a fixed salary for a certain term of years, with certain privileges stipulated. I knew of some people who resorted to this type of pseudo-legal union after they were no longer eligible for the other two types.

And besides all types of marriage, open concubinage is distressingly common. I heard a Brazilian man make the statement that there were very few men in his community able to do so who did not keep at least one woman besides their wives. These women are usually kept in a separate house, even in a different town. The children are acknowledged, though illegitimate, and are often very well provided for and educated, just as the children of the legal marriage.

The wedding feast is great or small, according to the resources of the family, and in a home of moderate means is apt to consist of cold turkey, various cakes and

pastries, including the wedding cake itself, some fancy cheese and biscuits, and a glass of wine, and is served buffet style, or at least it was so in the few that I attended. I do not recall ever seeing rice or shoes thrown at a wedding in Brazil. Nowadays the couple may go on a trip, but formerly the custom was to spend the first night at the bride's home, and of course the bridal bed is prepared and suitably adorned, Brazilian housewives being noted for their lace and embroidery. The bed is on exhibition, and admiring guests examine it, feeling it, and admiring its softness and beauty.

I was at the registrar's office one day for a document that I needed, when a man came in, asking the registrar to prepare quickly a birth certificate for a man seventy-six years old, who had never been registered. (In such a case someone makes oath that the man was born at such a time and place, and the certificate is issued; but without the birth certificate nothing can be done.) There was need for haste, for the man had to get married. I could not help marveling at such haste for the wedding of a man at that time of life, and they explained to me that the man was at the point of death, and had children by a common law marriage who needed to be legitimized in order to settle some question of inheritance. It is the only time that I can remember seeing a Brazilian in any sort of public office get in a hurry -- and even then he had time to stop and talk about it.